Mr. President, I wish to comment just very briefly on what

is going on over the course of this week in Iraq, as it focuses on

Iraqi democracy and the process that has begun in this country today

and will continue through Thursday when the elections are carried out

in Iraq.

Earlier this morning, I had the opportunity to talk at the White

House in a meeting by teleconference with our Ambassador to Iraq, in

Iraq, and General George Casey about the remarkable progress going on

in that country today as they updated us with the plans for the

elections, what is underway, and looking back to the tremendous

progress that has been made over the last several months and the truly

remarkable progress that has been made in the elections in January and

October and now the preparations made for the elections this week.

On Thursday, the Iraqi people began what is a historic process for

choosing their first fully constitutional parliament since the fall of

Saddam, culminating in this nationwide vote on Thursday, December 15.

In our briefings this morning, it was pointed out that the elections

are Thursday and many of us will be watching to see how large a turnout

there will be, recognizing that 10 million people turned out for the

last elections in October.

Our briefers also pointed out the fact that we have to moderate our

expectations a little bit in terms of the overall timing because of the

sequence of the events with the elections on Thursday and then a

preliminary certification of the elections about a week later and then

a final certification in early January, around January 6 or 7. The

government itself becomes a product of that

parliament, and that will not be finalized until April of next year,

but the process has begun, and the votes, even among Iraqis in this

country right now, are beginning today.

The country, as we think back just 2\1/2\ years ago, that was ruled

by tyranny and despotism is, with the help of American and coalition

forces, transforming itself into a hopeful and democratic society. That

hope is being felt by the Iraqi people as they move forward, rebuilding

and renewing their country.

In yesterday's widely reported new polling data, the Iraqis believe

their lives are going well, with nearly two-thirds expecting that

things will improve in the months and years ahead. Average household

incomes have skyrocketed by 60 percent in the last 20 months, and

Iraqis are quickly joining the swift current of modernity with cell

phones and the Internet, cars, washing machines, and satellite dishes.

Even ABC News, which commissioned the poll, rates the Iraqi mood at

In Thursday's elections, we will also have marked yet another

milestone in their transition from dictatorship to democracy. Just in

the past year, we have witnessed a series of truly extraordinary

events. Last January, 8.5 million Iraqis defied the terrorists and

marched to the polls. Who will ever forget the remarkable picture of

Iraqis proudly displaying their purple-stained finger, citing that

freedom, that ability to vote. They showed the world their readiness

and eagerness to participate in a new system of government.

Throughout the summer, Iraq's leaders worked through the painful

give-and-take process of drafting the nation's permanent constitution.

Even though much of Iraq's Sunni Arab population boycotted the January

elections, Iraq's elected officials worked hard to reach out and

include the Sunni Arab representatives in the constitution-drafting

process. They understood the importance of including leaders from all

of Iraq's ethnic and religious communities in such a historic endeavor.

As we saw by summer's end, their patience, compromise, and inclusion

paid off. The draft they produced established the framework for a

stable and democratic Iraq at the heart of the Middle East. Their new

constitution safeguards individual minority rights, guarantees the

protection of human rights, and creates a system of government based on

the rule of law and the will of the Iraqi people.

In October, the Iraqi people turned out again, in overwhelming

numbers, to ratify their permanent constitution. More than 10 million

Iraqis across religious and ethnic lines went to the polls to

demonstrate their growing desire to have their voice heard in a

democratic political process.

Most of the increase in voter turnout came in Sunni areas of the

country.

As the political process continues to unfold, Iraq's Sunni Arabs are

coming to recognize the importance of taking part in that democratic

process.

Only through peaceful politics can the Sunni Arab community in Iraq

ensure that its rights are secured, its interests protected, and its

people represented at the national, provincial, and local levels.

Even though many Sunnis voted against Iraq's permanent constitution,

the trend line of increased political participation among the Sunni

population is heading up.

This morning, we were briefed directly from Iraq. The number of

polling stations in the Sunni parts of the country are increasing

dramatically day by day, much surpassing expectations.

More than 300 political parties and coalitions have registered for

this week's elections. Candidates are campaigning, and the Iraqi people

are again showing their willingness to defy terrorist threats and

participate--and participate actively--in the political process.

As President Bush articulated in his speech yesterday in

Philadelphia, Iraq is that central front in the war on terror.

Their move to democracy is essential to our shared victory over

terrorism.

It is not going to be easy.

We face an enemy who targets innocent civilians with bombings and

beheadings--an enemy who despises freedom, that fears democracy. They

will bend every effort to derail Iraq's continued progress until they

are ultimately defeated.

But I am confident the Iraqi people will succeed and that together we

will prevail over the terrorist enemy.

Time and time again, the Iraqi people have shown their friends and

their enemies that they are steadfast in their determination to secure

a bright, peaceful, and prosperous future for their children and for

their grandchildren.

They will do so again on Thursday, this Thursday, December 15.

I applaud President Bush for his unwavering commitment to freedom and

liberty for the Iraqi people. I applaud the Iraqi people for their

unwavering courage to secure their democratic future.

The United States will continue to stand behind them as they work to

become a peaceful, a united, a stable, and a secure and more prosperous

nation, a full member of the international community and a full partner

in the global war on terrorism.